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Taxidermy

Taxidermy, deriving from two Greek words meaning 'arrangement of skins', is the craft of preparing and mounting animal skins to appear 'lifelike' (Patchett 2015). Often considered creepy and gruesome, the lifelikeness of taxidermy animals is a source of discomfort for many. Moreover, with actual skin and bone reflecting the killing practices that went into their making, the ownership of taxidermy specimens and displays have been called into question. As a result many personal collections have been relegated to back rooms while those on institutional display are not to be replaced. Yet it is precisely their provocative presence that has inspired a new wave of interest in, and re-use of, taxidermy specimens and displays. Whether it is in museums and galleries, designer boutiques, or homes taxidermy animals are once again making their presence felt. They have even found a home in academia, where they are being utilized as important resources for telling complex histories of human-animal relations.

The craft of taxidermy emerged in response to one of the major technical challenges confronting eighteenth century European naturalists: how to preserve animal specimens for taxonomic study (the description, identification and naming of species). Enormous quantities of animal skins were being sent back to Europe from Africa, Asia, and the New World by naturalist-explorers. However, the skins were often in poor condition due to the crude preservation techniques administered. In 1748, French naturalist René-Antoine Réaumur (1683-1757) published a small pamphlet describing all known methods for preserving animal skins, which included stuffing. 'Stuffing', a rudimentary form of taxidermy, consisted of drying or tanning animal skins and then literally stuffing them with cotton or wood wool. However, this technique on its own was inadequate for maintaining permanent study collections as it failed to tackle the problem of insect attack. This was remedied when French apothecary Jean-Baptiste Bécœur (1718-1777) devised his 'arsenical soap' skin treatment, and versions of this formula have been used by museums as an insecticide until relatively recently.

With adequate preservation of skins ensured, the keepers of natural history collections turned their attentions to putting them on display. This required sculpting a body, often using the skeletal structure as a base and then binding wood-wool around it to create the bodily form, before arranging the skin on top. Dynamic displays using this technique were showcased at The Great Exhibition of London (the first international display of manufactured items) in 1851. Hugely popular with the general public, they increased demand for more engaging trophy and decorative taxidermy.

Trophy and decorative taxidermy had emerged alongside scientific taxidermy, when wealthy sportsmen-naturalists sought to amass their own personal "natural history" collections. However, instead of reflecting scientific knowledge, these collections were intended to showcase their owner's colonial conquests and hunting prowess. By the late nineteenth century large trophy taxidermy firms were competing to secure the lucrative hauls of these big-game sportsmen. For example, to outdo their rivals, the company Rowland Ward's of London developed a technique of modeling the flesh and muscles of animals out of clay, which enabled them to meet their clients demands for dynamic poses and animated (e.g., 'snarling') expressions. They even developed a range of 'animal furniture' such as zebra-hoof inkwells and elephant-feet umbrella stands. Although abhorrent today, at the time they were merely a way to make something, and money, out of the 'waste products' of big-game taxidermy because clients really only wanted the heads.

Museum taxidermy was also evolving in response to displays at the Great Exhibition, shifting from taxonomic to diorama display towards the end of the nineteenth-century. Diorama display took realism to the next level by presenting animal mounts in a re-creation of their natural habitat. The taxidermist Carl Akeley (1864-1926) is considered to have created some of the finest examples of habitat dioramas as part of his African Hall of Mammals at The American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Although designed and built by teams of people, including groundwork and scenic artists, the dioramas were brought together by Akeley's (1864-1926) ruling artistic vision: to produce visions of 'nature in perfection' (Haraway 1989: 42). To ensure this, Akeley had led several large-scale big-game hunting trips to Africa procure and preserve the best pelts to work with. However, in creating pristine scenes of African wildlife back at the museum, Akeley, according to social theorist Donna Haraway's famous critique of the hall had cleaned up the 'violence against nature' that went into their making (Haraway 1989: 42).

Thus, today, an increasingly conservation-conscious museum public has questioned the legitimacy of having 'death on display' (Alberti 2011). However a new wave of curators and academics are harnessing the provocative presence and difficult histories of taxidermy animals to engage with modern audiences (e.g. Patchett and Foster 2008). Outside of museums and galleries taxidermy remains a major side-industry of the hunting and trapping economies with auctions and sales being held regularly in the U.S. and online. In addition, taxidermy has even become part of the urban hipster culture with 'rogue' taxidermy – the creation of fantasy style animals such as rats with wings (Palet 2014). What is clear from this short survey is that taxidermy animals, from the earliest trade skins to their 'life-like' and even 'tacky' manifestations, offer rich resource for exploring the complexity of human-animal relations over time and place. So, the next time you meet the glass or hollow-eyed stare of a taxidermy animal, critically consider its journey from life to death and back again.

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See Also: Ethics, Hunting, Trophy Hunting, Zoology

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